

The nomenclature and past history in Britain of the Bean and Pink-footed Geese

by W.R.P. Bourne

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Witherby (1939: 193) stated in footnotes under the Bean Goose that “Latham’s (1787) description (of *Anser fabalis*), which is taken from Pennant (1776)... fits the Pink-footed Goose (*A. brachyrhynchus*) rather better than the Bean Goose. It was not, however, until many years afterwards that it was realised that there were two kinds of ‘Bean’ Geese, and the name *fabalis* had better be retained for the bird we now call the Bean Goose...”. Then, under the Pinkfoot (p. 198), “although early records are doubtful owing to the great confusion which existed between this and the Bean Goose (persisting long after the two were differentiated), there can be no doubt that the Pink-footed Goose has increased very considerably in this country”. This gives rise to problems with both the nomenclature and past distribution of the birds.

Nomenclature

Coombes (1947) observed that most of the early accounts of the Bean Goose, before the description of the Pink-foot (Baillon 1833), are ambiguous and suggested that, as the birds described were usually rather small, they may often have been the latter. As a result, there was debate over the Bean Goose’s correct scientific name (Bannerman 1957). Nobody appears to have noticed that the ambiguous original account of the Bean Goose by Pennant (1776), quoted by Latham (1787) in his description of *A. fabalis* (renamed *A. segetum* by Gmelin 1789), included a figure of a Taiga Bean Goose (currently usually called *A. f. fabilis*) with a long, slender bill (Fig. 1), and so its identity should present no problem.

Distribution

The past distribution of the grey geese continues, however, to present a problem. As late as 1834, Selby (1835) still misidentified apparently numerous breeding Greylags *A. anser* in Sutherland as Bean Geese. Shortly afterwards Bartlett (1839) stated that the Greylag was the scarcest species in England, listed the Whitefront *A. albifrons* and Bean, and first reported a dozen Pinkfeet from markets (which would not be accepted as evidence for the occurrence of a new British species now!). It was thought at first only to occur in small numbers among abundant Bean Geese. The first good account of grey geese in the field in Yorkshire by Arthur Strickland (1858) indicated otherwise. He reported that the Greylag was formerly resident, and the Whitefront an occasional hard-weather visitor, and continued (his italics):-

“from time immemorial, one of the features of the north and east of England has been the regular appearance of flocks of wild geese, which arrive every

autumn... at the time of bean harvest and when the bean stubbles were ready for them... *This species is the only one that has any claim to the name of Bean Goose (or segetum), the only migratory species in this country, and the only common and abundant species that we have...* Some years ago Mr Bartlett, struck by the obvious difference between the geese he met with in the markets and the descriptions and drawings given of the Bean Goose... was induced to institute a new species, under the name of the Pink-footed Goose... this was... the young of the true Bean Goose... distinguished by its short and strong bill- its depth at the base being nearly two-thirds of its length- and by its migratory habits- differing in that respect from all our other geese, arriving periodically every autumn, spreading during the day-time over the stubbles and clover-fields of the wolds and other open districts, arising like clock-work in the evening, and winging their way in long strings to the sand-banks of the Humber and other safe retreats for the night..."

He then went on to describe and name *Anser paludosus*

"The Long-billed Goose, figured and described by Mr Yarrell, Mr Gould and Mr Morris under the name of *segetum* or Bean Goose. This is distinguished by having the bill exactly twice the length of the depth at the base... Before the beginning of this (the 19th) century, when the carrs of Yorkshire were the resort of countless multitudes and numerous species of wildfowl... it was

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BEAN GOOSE.

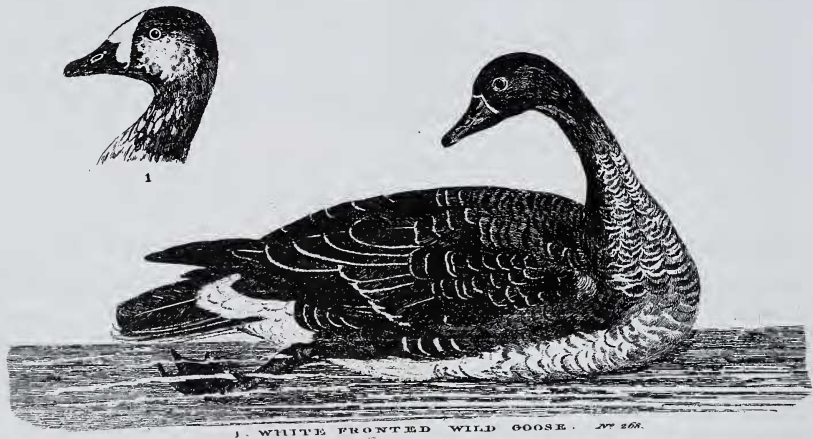


Figure 1. Figure accompanying Pennant's (1776) original description of the Bean Goose. It appears a big bird with long extremities, notably the long, slender bill with indistinct Taiga Bean Goose type markings, and its head no darker than the back. This contrasts with the small, compact form of the Pink-footed Goose with a short, heavily-marked bill and the head darker than the back.

stated there were two species of geese frequenting and breeding in the carrs, known by (the decoy-men, fowlers and carr-men) by the name of the Grey-lag and the Carr-lag... What the Carr-lag was it seems impossible now to demonstrate; but I have every reason to think it was this Long-billed Goose... distinguished from the Short-billed or Bean Goose by its entirely different habits.”

Conclusion

East Anglian Anglo-Saxon archaeological remains include bones of Grey-lag and probably also Pinkfeet and Whitefronted Geese (Clutton-Brock 1976), which were apparently already a pest (Kear 2001). There are now few bird skins left in Britain from before the introduction of arsenical preservatives in the 1830s. It is notable, however, that the oldest goose of the Bean group traced, No. 2569 in the Strickland Collection at Cambridge (Salvin 1882), procured by Arthur's cousin Hugh (Jardine 1858) in Worcestershire in January 1838, and originally labelled, like most 19th century British specimens of both Bean and Pinkfooted, and sometimes Greylag geese, *Anser segetum*, is a Pinkfoot (wing 433, exposed culmen 51, tarsus 75 mm).

It is debatable what the Carr-lag Goose was. Mitchell (1885) identified the Skergrygs or Scargrass as the Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*, and Newton (1896) the Carr-goose as the Great-crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*. But there seems no reason to question Strickland's identification of the innumerable "Bean Geese" that had passed through Scotland (Bourne & Ralph 2000) to winter in north-east England in force since "time immemorial" as Pinkfeet, or doubt his report that the Taiga Bean Goose *A. (f.) fabalis* may once have bred but was already, by the 1850s, "one of our scarcest British birds".

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Gender agreement of avian species names

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Despite propositions to the contrary, the new edition of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature has reaffirmed the long-standing usage of gender agreement between Latin or latinized adjectival species-group names and the genus name with which they are combined (ICZN 1999: xxvi). Although the usefulness of the gender agreement convention can be questioned, proper adherence to the convention is important once it has been accepted. In this era of computerized databases, it is increasingly useful that the spelling of scientific names be standardized, especially since names differing by only one or two letters may designate altogether different taxa.

Nevertheless, different spellings of the same name are often encountered, when obviously only one is correct (see Appendix). The present contribution itemises recurrent misspellings and misinterpretations of gender agreement in major ornithological references. Our objective is not only to correct these misspellings, but also to stress how similar cases should be addressed when they arise. Indeed, new name combinations are likely to continue to appear as the systematic position of more and more taxa is being re-examined using biochemical techniques. Even though the wording of the ICZN Code is usually straightforward, its implementation is not necessarily simple and often requires a thorough, step-by-step approach. For the most part, the ICZN requirements are certainly no more overwhelming than the grammatical requirements of any modern language.

Surprisingly, although gender agreement might be perceived by some as an unnecessary requirement, we have found as many names where the ending was